

Grace, Mercy & Peace from God our Father & our Lord Jesus Christ.

When I first read our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah in seminary, I recall briefly questioning my calling to be a pastor because it seemed to me that Jeremiah speaks about and to religious leaders in this morning's Old Testament reading. Being that the word "*pastor*" literally means "*shepherd*" in Latin Jeremiah's words gave me serious pause. ***If shepherds receive this level of scrutiny from God, it might not be wise to avoid put myself in the role that Jeremiah's prophecy appears to the put in the cross hairs of God's judgment this morning.***

You can understand why I might have been concerned? Yes?

Fortunately, one of the things I learned in seminary is that ***the shepherds to whom Jeremiah speaks are not religious leaders, but rather the kings of Judah and Israel. The prophet's words predict the final demise of a rather long chapter in the history of God's people – the failed experiment of human kings – whose time of leadership ends forever in 597 B.C.E.***

It all starts in ***1 Samuel*** when God's people, tired of the see saw of stability and instability in the time of the judges, ***ask that they might be like the neighboring nations around them, and be led by a human king.*** In 1 Samuel 8 ***the Lord has Samuel warn the people*** what kings will be like:

¹¹ "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will

take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

But they *take no heed of the warning*, and demand a king like their neighbors. Beginning with **King Saul** and ending with **King Jehoiachin**, *an era of catastrophic and self-serving leaders dominates the life of God's people for nearly 500 years. From 1043 to 597 B.C.E. 39 kings rule over Judah* – an average reign of a little over 11 years; remember kings don't retire, only death ends their reign. Still, that's nothing. From the time *the northern kingdom of Israel declares its own king in 931 B.C.E. until its complete annihilation in 721 B.C.E., 21 kings rule Israel*; an average reign of 9 years.

In those intervening years *Samuels description of what having a king will be like is realized over and over again – rulers who think they're the smartest, wisest, most highly entitled, who believe their opinions are unimpeachable, their edicts beyond question, their behavior and corruption beyond prosecution* – *It's not really that hard to imagine, is it?*

Raising up *human leaders rarely yields good results*. In fact, the *people often pay dearly*. Sounds painfully familiar, doesn't it. Nothing has really changed. *Now we simply have systems that try to limit the damage any single person can bring upon a nation – checks & balances* – equal branches of government accountable to the other, *independent*

judiciaries, elections, *bi-cameral assemblies* (that is 2 houses like the senate and house). *Following human leaders has been a bust. We've known that now for more than 2600 years and yet people still look to them for leadership.*

The irony of course is Jeremiah promises a better shepherd:

⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing,

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

– *a shepherd who is in fact the Lord.* He comes among us in humility and service, and *shows us the way of peace, justice, righteousness and abundance for all.* And still, we still clamor after leaders with feet of clay who promise to give us what we want.

All the while the Good Shepherd bids us follow to greener pastures, following the rule of love. He has compassion for us, because we are like sheep without a shepherd; and He teaches us many things. *Let us not forget that we belong to a different kingdom, ruled in love,* where if we follow Christ's way – the way of the cross – we can live in peace together.

St. Paul understands. In Ephesians he *lays out the different realities and the choice before us:* hostility or reconciliation; *living without hope and without God in the world or living in God's presence by the blood of Christ;* strangers and aliens or members of the household of God. *How can we not see what is so obvious? We can go on chasing after leaders who say they'll give us what we want, or we can follow the God's chosen shepherd Jesus about whom Jeremiah speaks.*

Let's face it, *once in a while truly good human leader emerges, but most often they don't deliver on their promises* or have an ounce of concern or compassion for the common person. *When we would focus on following the teaching of God's Shepherd, we can build the household of God in this place* – where even the weakest are taken care of, *where we extend compassion to our neighbor*, withhold judgment of others and live in a community of gentleness, *interpret our brother's and sister's actions in the best possible light*, break down the dividing walls of hostility among us to be one people in Him; *be reconciled and at peace with one another*; be joined together and grow into a holy temple in the Lord; *be built together into a dwelling place for God.*

Rather than focusing our attention and energy on the one's battling to be president – God help us all, let us direct our energies into following the Shepherd God has raised up over us so that we can be a new people, a new creation, a people

sent out to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit (Isaiah 61:1-3).

Though there will always be momentary satisfaction in judging the shortcomings and failings of human leaders, let us instead focus our energy and attentions on following the Shepherd who leads us into the way of peace.

Amen !